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Fragile areas in the Alpine region: a reading between innovation and marginality

Federica Corrado

- 1 Today, the Alps can be considered a multi-faceted European region with its own history, traditions and culture and also physical-morphologic and bio-geographic characteristics. Depicting the Alps according to bucolic stereotypes or, even worse, consumistic representations linked to the practice of Winter Sports, with consequent distortion of the Alpine environment, is not only absolutely reductive but also superficial.
- 2 Bätzing (2005) highlights at least three misconceptions in visions of the Alps: the idea of a backward region isolated in the centre of Europe, of an almost completely agricultural society, of a completely rural region without cities. Instead, covering the entire length of the Alpine region, there are territories with specific resources characterised by different forms of development or decline:
 - in some cases, the Alpine territory has become the privileged site of various activities, comprising manufacturing, technology, agriculture and tourism;
 - in other cases, the Alpine territory has been protected, voluntarily or involuntarily, against the impacts of cultural and environmental pollution, with noteworthy economic, demographic and social repercussions that have produced a slow but continuous process of depopulation in certain areas, thereby generating “regional disparities” within the same Alpine macro-region (Boesch, 2005);
 - in other cases, the Alpine territory has become an area of urban dependence/commuting, thus creating the so-called peri-urban areas.
- 3 This territorial heterogeneity is a specific factor of wealth of the Alps, increasingly identifiable as a space integrated in the heart of Europe, not only in physical-geographical but also political and economic terms (Dematteis, 2009), a laboratory of experimental development patterns (Bätzing 2005), a privileged site of the contemporary landscape.

- 4 To some extent, this concept of the Alpine region, recognized at European and supra-local level (Community Documents Europa 2000 and Europa 2000+, Interreg Alpine Space, Convention of the Alps) is also a result of a regional and sub-regional capacity to project and to represent the Alpine territory in a suite of specific and bottom up initiatives, activities, proposals and projects. From this point of view, considerable interest is now dedicated to the Alpine territory at European level, not as “problem zones” but rather as a “distinct area” with excellent potential to be valorised and “a robust capacity to innovate and experiment borne of adversity” (Dax, 2008).

Fragile areas in/of the Alps

- 5 In this heterogeneity of territories of the Alps, those considered traditionally as “fragile” are the areas affected by depopulation, by a constantly negative demographic trend, limited production activities with few opportunities for employment and a shortage of services – in the broader meaning of the term – for persons and companies. These territories usually are small/medium municipalities with a mainly rural vocation, a low level of industrialisation, as yet undiscovered or little known to tourists, with mainly elderly population – where the population has to some extent remained –, often with infrastructural shortcomings (Osti, 2004, The World Bank, 2003). In other words, the CIPRA (the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps) defines these territories as “municipalities with structural and development weaknesses” (CIPRA, 2007) as characterised by a negative demographic trend, a population of less than 300 inhabitants, a mainly elderly population, a high percentage of outbound commuters. The territories affected by this situation of marked fragility include, in particular, the Ligurian Alps, the Alps of Piemonte, East Tyrol, the Niedere Tauern and certain Eastern areas of the Alps.
- 6 However, in most cases, these apparently fragile areas have a great potential to be revealed or (re)valorised: their natural environment, often uncontaminated, their still fairly integral architectural and cultural traditions, their attachment to the territory, that can become creative forces. Thus, taking into account this apparent fragility, they can be described from a different standpoint, overturning the traditional view in which the concept of marginality is often synonymous for handicap, in order to perceive everything that can still be uncovered by innovative technical, cultural, social, participation dynamics specifically linked to a suite of particular conditions of the territories. Therefore, an interpretation in a positive key, focussed on the territory, its specific characteristics, its transformation energies, the subjective and/or collective movements that define its identity (Dematteis 1995, Magnaghi, 2000).
- 7 To move in this direction, it is necessary first of all to demolish a number of dichotomies that have influenced many of the territorial policies in the Alpine (and mountain) area in general. Reference is made specifically to:
- urbanity/alpinity. There is a rooted idea that the Alps and, therefore, the Alpine territory, must be described as something completely opposed to the city. The city is considered to be a place of frenetic, polluting corrupting, creative human activity while the mountains embody the idea of peace, leisure, tradition. Inculcation of this idea (Crivelli 2007, Racine 2004) was particularly effective in sustaining mono-sector policies of tourism, of holiday homes, etc. and in the museumification policies of the

environment, promoting freezing of Alpine identity and tradition rather than reconsideration of this from an innovative point of view;

- dominance/dependence. The dichotomy reflects in the strong predominance of the industrialised city over the rural periphery that has generated an unbalanced relationship between the plain and the mountains, forged by “regional egoisms” that European regional planning is now attempting to curtail and modify (Perlik, 1999);

- fixity/changeability. The dichotomy is referred to the fact that, in the collective imagination, the mountain is considered to be static, fixed, impervious to change compared with traditional urban contexts. Instead, the Alps (and mountains in general) have always been characterised by slow but continuous adaptation of the territory to external events, an ability to adapt that has allowed man to survive in very harsh natural environments;

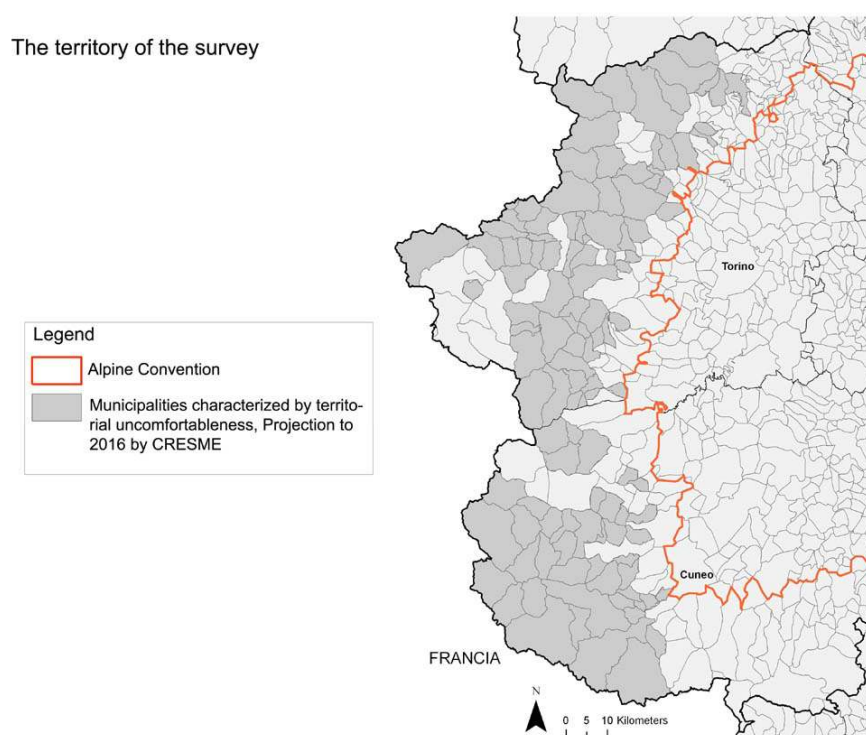
- localism(s)/glocalism. The dichotomy refers to the fact that, on the one hand, many Alpine Communities have localistic visions of development and, on the other, integrated, sustainable development prospects are being consolidated at regional (Alpine convention, Interreg Alpine Space) and supra-regional (for example, Euromontana) level. Consequently, to promote sustainable development, a compromise must be achieved between specific issues and global interests by recognizing Alpine specificity and considering this in relation to the global environment (Debarbieux, Price, 2008).

- 8 According to the above, adoption of a “positive” criterion of interpretation of fragile alpine areas - based on the recognition of the potentialities - is aligned with the objective of reinforcing territorial cohesion (Green Paper on territorial cohesion) and application of the Lisbon and Goteborg Strategies. In this framework, the small/medium municipalities of the Alpine macro-region represent an effective laboratory.
- 9 Adapting this criterion of interpretation, it can be argued that territories inside the Alpine region, equipped with specific territorial resources that define their “alpinity” – and therefore their identity –, can also become nodes of advanced activities, linked to transnational and regional networks.

Another view on the fragile Alpine areas in the Provinces of Turin and Cuneo

- 10 Overturning the point of view, as mentioned above, it is possible to draw up a description of these territories that, while taking into account their fragility, puts in evidence creative ability, territorial intelligence, innovativeness. A non-conventional reading of fragile areas applied to a mountain territory forming part of the Provinces of Turin and of Cuneo and identified inside the perimeter of the Alpine Convention is proposed below.

Figure 1. The territory of the survey (cartographic elaboration by Alberto Di Gioia).



- 11 The marginality of this territory has been considered referring to the situation of territorial uncomfortableness described in a Report elaborated in Italy in 2008 by CRESME (Centre for Economic and social market research concerning building and land development) and Confcommercio-Legambiente. This Report stresses that the conditions that generate territorial uncomfortableness in many Italian municipalities lie not only in weak settlement patterns of the resident population (drop in the birth rate, increase in the aged population, etc.) but also in evident conditions of impoverishment of production capacity and talents, with economic indexes that reveal the structural weakness of these areas and their consequent limited appeal to the outside and, consequently, their ability to attract and accommodate new citizens, new inhabitants, new families and businesses. The differences that emerge are not so much between mountain, hill, plain and city, but rather within the same physical-geographical categories. Therefore, according to the projection to 2016 proposed by this study, it can be seen that the municipalities with this type of territorial uncomfortableness account for around 43% of the total considered.
- 12 Referring to the marginal territories of the Alps, an analysis has been made of initiatives effectively applied to combat any evident form of marginality (economic, social, etc.), adopting factors of territorial innovativeness. Innovativeness that means ability to create, to develop and to promote local resource valorisation actions, that overstep conventional development schemes, and capacity to invert an apparently on-going local negative tendency.
- 13 This work of empirical analysis, mainly based on interviews of privileged witnesses, insiders and/or outsiders in relation to the local context, has made it possible to select, as example, initiatives that have activated innovative development dynamics. When identifying the initiatives, the following aspects were considered:

- location of the initiative in a municipality considered to be affected by territorial uncomfortableness in order to individuate local creativity;
- innovative forms of valorisation of endogenous local resources, from know-how to environmental and architectural assets, etc.;
- correspondence with criteria of better livability and/or support to the local development.

14 According to the survey made, a summary table of the initiatives identified has been constructed (Tab. 1). As can be seen from the table, these initiatives regards many sectors of interest, ranging from economic to social and cultural. It is interesting to note that initiatives referred to services, culture and research and training can still be considered experiments localized. As in the case of the IT infrastructuring of the Orco and Soana Valleys through the WI-PIE project of the Regione Piemonte, the action has permitted the connection of the territory to the network with always-on type access solutions, or in the case of Vinadio and Demonte, with the use of teaching electronic blackboard which means that students living in the villages of the upper valley no longer need to descend to the main centres in order to attend school.

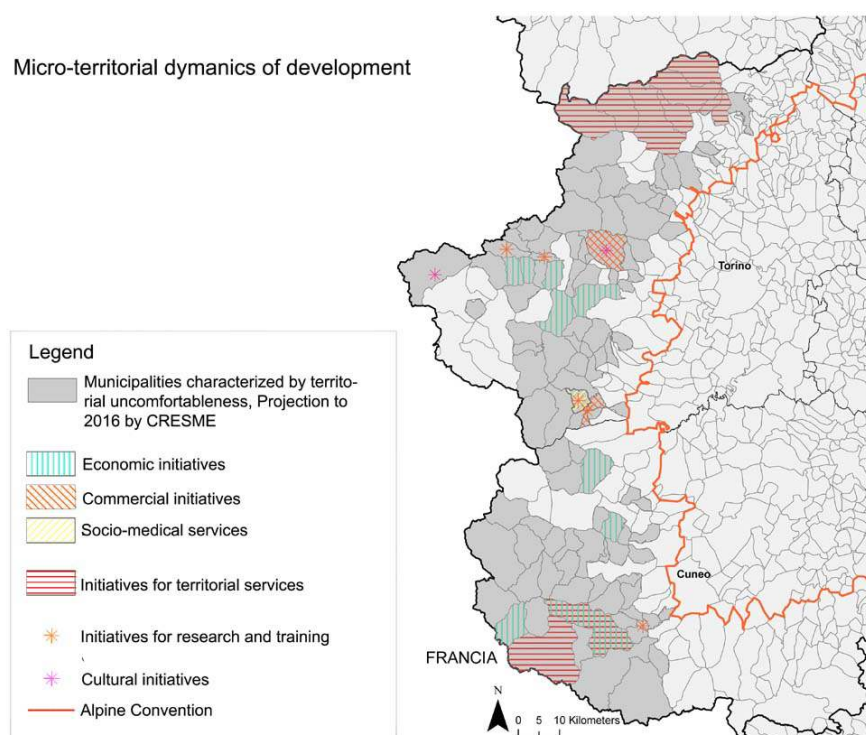
Table 1. Classification of the innovative initiatives individuated in the area of the survey.

Type of initiatives	Sector	Comune
Economic initiatives	Agro-alimentary	CHIOMONTE
		GRAVERE
		COAZZE
		ROURE
		DEMONTÉ
		PIETRAPORZIO
		PAESANA
		MELLE
Initiatives for territorial services	Supply of services	MATTIE
	Commerce	CONDÖVE
		LUSERNA SAN GIOVANNI
	Social and medical services	TORRE PELLICE
	Telematic	VALPRATO SOANA
		RONCO CANAVESE
		LOCANA
		CERESOLE REALE
		NOASCA
		INGRIA
		FRASSINETTO
		RIBORDONE
		PAESANA
	Didactic	DEMONTÉ
		VINADIO
Initiatives for research and training	Anthropology	GIAGLIONE
		SUSA
	Socio-medical assistance	TORRE PELLICE
	Environment	LUSERNA SAN GIOVANNI
		GAIOIA
Cultural initiatives	Video	CONDÖVE
		BARDONECCHIA

15 There are also many examples of business activities in the Alpine area studied (Fig. 3). These are generally innovative activities concentrated principally in the agro-food production and eno-gastronomic sectors, as in the case of recovery of ancient vineyards to produce DOC wines (Chiomonte and Graverè), the relaunch of livestock breeding for DOP products (Demonte and Pietraporzio), the recovery of ancient recipes with the aid of modern technological instruments (Roure and Coazze), and the production of officinal products using innovative processes (Melle and Paesana).

- 16 These initiatives are closely linked, in different ways, to Alpine territorial capital in terms of natural resources (forests, climate, water, etc.), historic-architectural resources (farmhouses, ancient villages, etc.), cognitive resources (local know-how, knowledge of ancient trades and traditions, etc.). Therefore, these initiatives highlight a certain creative capacity of the Alps (Raffestin, 1999), a “collective territorial intelligence”, expression of an “alpinity” that has not so much been inherited as defined by a new territoriality (Fourny, 2004), a turn for innovation as a motor of development (Revue de Géographie Alpine, 2009).
- 17 These elements have initiated – as in the cases identified – processes that are not intrinsically obvious but which are highly complex as there is always a fundamental uncertainty inherent in innovative processes (Fagerberg, 2005). Furthermore, their outcome is always closely tied not only to the particular historic, environmental, social and cultural characteristics of the context in which they are inserted but also to local capacity to activate a profitable interchange between the actors involved and to put in value the experience accumulated (Goio, curated by, 2007). These can still be considered experiences that combine different forms of cultural, social and participative innovation, etc. closely related to the local context. They therefore represent evident traces of an ongoing development process: the conditions exist in the Alps for the reformulation in modern terms of certain specific solutions already drafted by Alpine culture, constructing a regional network of the various expressions of creativity linked to that of global flows.

Figure 2. Micro-territorial dynamics of development.



Cartographic elaboration by Alberto Di Gioia.

Conclusions

- 18 Taking a different view of these territories, we can first of all claim that the most internal and most fragile Alpine territories can be considered as areas imbued with a territorial innovativeness linked to the specific context (from innovation in the production sector to innovation of territorial services, CIPRA, 2007). This survey demonstrates that innovations are in course on/in the Alpine territory that can generally be ascribed to two types of dynamics:
- 19 - macro-territorial development dynamics. This is the case of medium-size Alpine towns that play an important role in the rural region in which they are located. These towns host technological poles or high level research centres or Universities (this is the case, for example of the Gap techno-park dedicated to technological research and communication, combining research, training and business). In these cases, innovative processes are at work aimed at developing a knowledge-based economy in order to compete on an urban and territorial scale at European and/or global level. These innovations are generally associated with footloose methods of development;
- 20 - micro-territorial development dynamics, constructed by single actors or, at the most, small communities, involving mainly bottom-up innovation dynamics that trigger virtuous processes of micro territorial development but which offer economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits to the surrounding territory. These are the specific dynamics involved in the case studied and more generally in fragile areas.
- 21 The dynamics concerned, both at macro and micro level, highlight the creative potential of/in the Alps, therefore producing an “information-driven revolution”, concentrated inside the Alps (Raffestin, 1999). The start of a similar revolution can be understood only by considering that the inhabitants of the Alps, especially if young, no longer comply with the stereotyped image of the “mountaineer”. Substantially, they do not differ from the rest of urbanised society as regards income, level of education, living habits, personal values and aspirations. However, they are still affected by various restrictions such as access to many types of services, less opportunities of social-cultural interaction due to their relative isolation and low demographic density and, generally, by the difficulty of local fruition of the “city effect”. The reading based on fragility and innovation reveals that, today, the fragility of remote Alpine territories is reflected in particular in:
- a shortage of technological infrastructures also useful – as we have seen – in retaining various essential basic services in the territory;
 - scarcity of professional competence to manage development process in mountain areas;
 - the absence of policies against desertification of the mountains and therefore support of a new type of entrepreneurship.
- 22 If we are convinced of and believe in this new, and for certain aspects, different development of/in the Alps, it is necessary to sustain these development dynamics, without relying on revolutionary spontaneity, thinking therefore of:
- suitable legal measures to sustain to the innovation capacity of mountain areas. Signs of a move in this direction in Europe are reflected in the interpellation on this topic submitted to Parliament in January 2008 and, in Italy, the text presented at the Senate that represents an attempt to formulate ad hoc policies;

- specific forms of financing for the mountain areas that recognise different levels of development and related sub-regional problems: South-West Alps have been affected by depopulation problems, with areas of high level marginalisation compared with the area of Austria and Alto Adige where development paths launched some time ago, although requiring partial overhaul, have made it possible to overcome various structural problems such as abandonment of the territories or infrastructural shortcomings.
 - investments in maintaining territorial services, a minimum standard of basic territorial services, ranging from educational facilities, the place of diffusion and knowledge of Alpine culture, to social-welfare and health services, to road infrastructures underlying an efficient public transport service.
 - a “good governance” of development processes, as defined by CIPRA (2007), that permits adoption of quality decision-making processes and the construction of new relations within society (between the various sub-regional milieus) and with the outside at global level;
 - construction of new forms of territoriality as, although these micro and macro level development processes contribute to arresting or in some way inverting the tendency to abandon Alpine areas, in some cases they promote the positioning of new “inhabitants” in the Alps, i.e. those prompted by utilitarian reasons or by “an actualised ecologist ideology” (Fourny, 1996).
- 23 To approach these aspects in the best way, they must be discussed at a territorial level able to perceive the various requirements of the inhabitants of the Alps and sustain the related visions. This could be achieved, as in the case mentioned above, at Euro-region level as institutional actor that formulates development strategies and paths which are integrated and inserted in a network with other development paths of the Alpine area.

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ABSTRACTS

The paper proposes a reading and description of fragile Alpine areas that overturns the conventional standpoint, according to which marginality is often synonymous with handicap. The paper starts from a different point of view, able to recognize specific local potentialities that can still be activated with a specific creative effort. The reading regards fragile Alpine areas in the Provinces of Turin and Cuneo and is based on an empirical analysis of the actions underlying current micro-territorial innovative development trends.

Cet article propose une lecture et une description des territoires alpins fragiles, en jetant un autre regard, où le concept de fragilité est associé à celui de handicap, c'est-à-dire un autre regard sur l'identification des potentiels locaux spécifiques qui peuvent être encore activés à travers une force créatrice propre aux Alpes. La lecture est effectuée en fonction des territoires alpins fragiles qui font partie des provinces de Turin et Coni et se base sur une analyse empirique des initiatives qui enclenchent en quelque façon des dynamiques micro-territoriales de développement innovant.

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Mots-clés: développement local, dynamiques territoriales, innovation, territoires fragiles

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